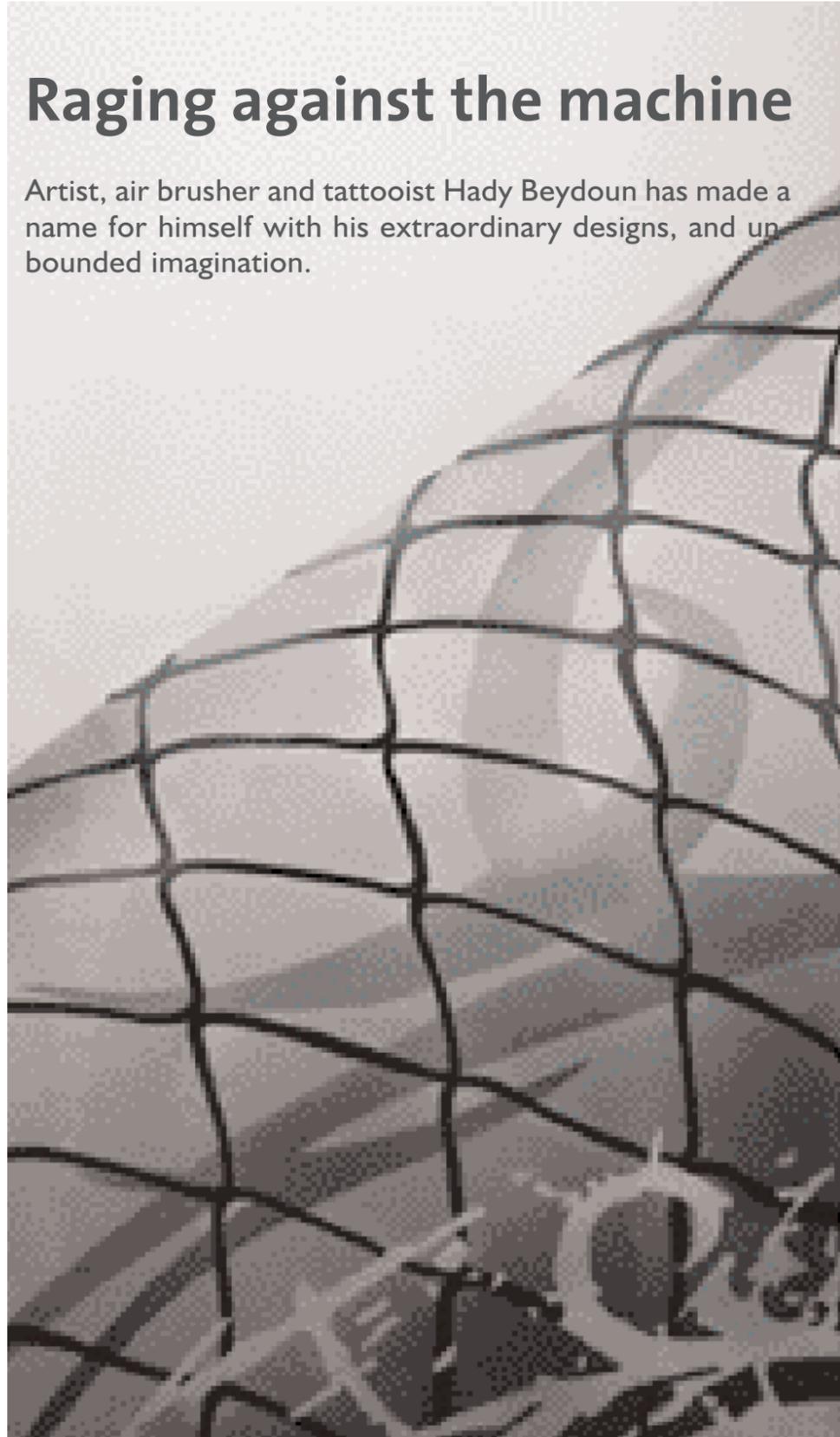


## Raging against the machine

Artist, air brusher and tattooist Hady Beydoun has made a name for himself with his extraordinary designs, and unbounded imagination.





**Above:** The crumpled Coke cans are part of a series of painted wooden carvings formed from a single log. The seemingly ravaged old guitar, is another airbrushed pop-art piece that draws curiosity from its viewers. **Opposite page:** Beydoun likes to shock with paintings that are often daring and risqué.

When he first tried his hand at tattooing, Hady Beydoun had no idea that it would become his vocation. "It's not something you expect to make a life and a career out of. But it called me," he says in his studio in eastern Beirut. He was comfortably seated in his haven, surrounded by photographs showing his handicraft: arms, chests and backs adorned with Celtic patterns alongside swirling Arabic script, mythical beasts, fairies and flowers.

The skin, to Beydoun, is just like canvas. In fact, the self-taught pop-art rebel prides himself on being able to paint on pretty much anything, not only the human body. Perspex, glass, concrete or wood; motor-bikes, snowboards; mannequins or mobile phones, Beydoun's creativity flows onto numerous surfaces. And of all the mediums, the airbrush remains his preferred - thanks to its wide versatility.

His paintings might not be to everyone's taste; many of them outlandish, others drawing from pop culture. But then, pleasing everyone is not what Beydoun aims to do. "I like shocking people," he surmises. Indeed 'Art is what you can get away with' is a quote that inspires Beydoun. Canadian pop culture scholar Marshall McLuhan's words are prominently displayed on Beydoun's website for it is a concept he has taken to heart.

A woman wearing only stilettos and covered in tattoos stares lustfully from a flex plate - a theme that recurs in a number of the more risqué paintings. An acrylics-on-paper work shows a hummingbird hovering above a red flower against a vivid blue sky. His studio is proof of his daring personality.

The art that we came to discuss hung around us: airbrush paintings covering the walls and sculptures standing around on the tables. And this is much of what grows Beydoun's cult following but the conversation inevitably meanders back to tattoos in the manner of one of his twisting, complex designs.

"It was something unheard of to base your career and life on tattoo artistry," he says. His father, an academic, disapproved, as did some of his friends, reflecting the conservative streak that still courses beneath Lebanon's relatively liberal culture. But no one stood in his way and Beydoun ultimately pioneered the art in Lebanon, nevertheless he remains somewhat surprised by the rapid growth of his client base.

Beydoun was a graphic artist, designing t-shirts and painting vivid airbrush murals. But when he saw a copy of a tattoo magazine it blew him away. Self taught and aided only by a single copy of this magazine along with the unyielding support of an enthusiastic (not to mention brave) coterie of friends willing to act as guinea pigs, he immersed himself into body art. "At first, the appeal was that it was a new medium," Beydoun says, "There's a certain charm to marking someone for life."

Historically, the art of tattooing has been practised all over the world for millennia. A tattooed mummy dating from the fourth to fifth millennium BC was found in the Ötztal valley in the Alps. Others dating from the end of the second millennium BC have been discovered, such as the Mummy of Amunet from Ancient Egypt. Yet most historians are ▶





Above: Beydoun prides himself on being able to paint on pretty much anything from the human skin, to a motobike's petrol tank or even snowboards.

agreed on the fact that the modern tattoo has its origins in Polynesia.

As Beydoun explains, even the word tattoo comes from Polynesian *tatau* and it suggests the tapping of spirits on the body, that is, because of the pain endured. After all, body art came about as a rite of passage for many tribes and cultures, harking back to a time when they were still an extremely painful test of endurance as well as a mark of belonging to a community. Even now that they have been made safer and less extreme, tattoos still hurt, and in modern life they play the same role. "A lot of people get tattooed when they are angry to know they exist," Beydoun says. "It's basic, the need to feel alive. You can surround yourself with a-c, computers, go to the spa, get your nails done or whatever...and then what?"

Beydoun's own anger was what drew him to the art form. "I was always angry at the world and I never liked the superficiality of people and how they attach so much importance to appearance," he says. But his journey began in the arts. Beydoun studied graphic design at the American University of Beirut, after which he worked briefly in an advertising agency. Interestingly, his stint designing commercials for several major brands never dulled his urge to rage against the machine. Such home-spun philosophy crops up constantly in a conversation with Beydoun.

Skin Deep, the monthly newsletter of his studio of the same name, is rich with his musings on pain, immortality and, of course, tattoos. "Most people strive for the *Dolce Vita*, chilled, relaxed, easy

life," he writes in one issue. "But it should be the other way around. Hard life is worthy life."

Many of his pop-art pieces, which have quite a following of their own, turn commercial, globalised culture on its head. Most technically impressive are a series of crumpled cans, the height of small stools, that turn out to be carved from a single log of wood before being painted. Realistically metallic and streaked with rust, the pieces play on famous brands, such as the humble Campbell's soup tin can made iconic by the father of pop art, Andy Warhol. The messages are subversive, though at times somewhat puerile. A mock-up Coca-Cola can plays on an unorthodox theme; and a seemingly ravaged old guitar, is airbrushed, drawing curiosity from its viewers. A 7-Up can displays the message 'Don't give up,' while a Duracell battery bears the words 'Renewal spirit' in place of the brand.

Such items are icons of our times but, the way he renders them, they also reflect the human condition. In the end, they rust and crumple. "The truth is never advertised," Beydoun says. "Who would think a Coke can could be a work of art?"

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